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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

نحمده ونصلي على رسوله الكريم

THE STATUS OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN ISLAM

FAZLUR RAHMAN

[This paper was read at the East-West Philosophy Conference, University of Hawaii, Summer, 1964.]

Islam is generally believed to be—both by many of its modern believing exponents and a large number of non-Muslim writers—a religion emphasizing society rather than the individual.[1] It is pointed out in this connection that law, social institutions, and statecraft are the primary constituents of Islam, because this fact is demonstrated in the earliest segments of Muslim history, which the Muslims regard as an ideal. A good deal of the Qur'ān itself is also devoted to legislation and guidance of the affairs of the Community, rather than the individual. Further, the Qur'ān speaks of the Muslim Community as "The Middle Community" charged with the task of executing God's will on earth. It is then concluded that, if the Holy Book of Islam gives so much importance to society and collective existence and if the actual performance in history of the Prophet and of his immediate followers bears this out, it follows that Islam is primarily a "social religion". With this primary emphasis on collective existence and the fundamental importance of the Community, one begins to wonder what can be the status of the individual.

In the following an attempt will be made to bring out the status of the individual in Islam as a religion. Having brought out that status, we shall then attempt to put the individual in relation to society in its right perspective in the religious teachings of Islam. It will be seen at the end that, although the statements given above regarding the importance of the Community and social existence in Islam are essentially correct, nevertheless, the conclusion drawn therefrom, that Islam aims primarily or finally at society rather than at the individual, is unwarranted. It will also be seen that, when the modernist Muslim tends to emphasize society in his interpretation of Islam, he is, in fact, not so much aiming at a pure and objective statement of Islamic values *per se*, as

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aiming indirectly at reform of Muslim society which is his present-day business.

Now, there is no doubt that the primary locus of responsibility in Islam is the individual. The Qur'ān says, "Today (on the Day of Judgement) you have come to Us as individuals (*furādā*), just as We created you in the first place".[2] Again, "He shall come to Us alone (as an individual)".[3] Again, the Qur'ān tells us, "Every soul earns but for itself, and no soul shall bear the burden of another, and even thus shall you return to your Lord".[4] (This last statement is repeated in VI : 165, XVII : 15, XXXV : 18, XXXIX : 7 and LIII : 38). It is on these grounds that Muslim theologians reject the possibility of redemption, even though at a later stage of the development of Muslim theology, in the late second and early third centuries, the doctrine of intercession was introduced. These verses make it abundantly clear that the ultimate repository of the divine trust is the individual person. But such a statement is not enough, unless it is made clear as to what are the ultimate objective and the real purpose behind the creation of the individual. Only when we understand the philosophy of Islam on this point shall we be able to appreciate the position of the individual and his relation to society.

In this connection, the story of the creation of man in the Qur'ān seems very revealing, indeed. We are told[5] that, when God willed to create man, the angels raised a protest, saying, "Will You create on earth a being who will work corruption and shed blood, while we sing Your praises and glorify You" ? God, in His reply, does not deny that man will commit errors and make mistakes, but says simply, "I know what you know not". The Qur'ān then proceeds to tell us that God taught Adam "all the names" (of things, i.e., their properties and attributes),[6] and this constitutes the superiority of man over angels. One further fundamental statement of the Qur'ān on this point remains to be noted, *viz.*, "We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to accept it and were frightened of it, but man accepted it".[7] These statements, taken together, show that there are certain potentialities and possibilities which can be realized only by man among all creation. In the entire range of created being, man alone is capable of real achievement and development, and, further, he is squarely charged with the responsibility for the realization of these potentialities. The

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proper discharge of this "Trust" is "service to God" (*'ibādah*), which, in Islam, does not mean the devotional side of religious life exclusively but the sum total of output of man under the moral law. The most frequently recurring term in the Qur'ān and in the Traditions of the Prophet to describe this attitude, which attunes a man to discharge his responsibilities properly and do justice to his innate capacities, is the Arabic term "*taqwā*". This term has been variously understood and translated both by Muslims and non-Muslims as "piety", "fear of God", and "guarding oneself".

Taqwā is an attribute of the individual and not of society, and, as we have just said, it is this principle which makes a man perform his functions as the highest creation of God properly and become man in the true sense. But, before we go any further, we must try to clarify this concept and understand it more closely. Terms like "piety" and "fear of God", although an integral part of the concept of *taqwā*, do not really convey its full meaning as they are commonly understood. Even the term "fear" is applied at various levels with regard to different types of reactions and attitudes in reference to different objects. Thus, one fears a wolf, a criminal, or a person suspected of a crime may fear the police ; a child may fear his parents, or his teacher, or a bully at school. Not all these senses are identical with one another, but there is a sense which is different from all of these, and is applicable only to the human being. This is the sense in which the relative always falls short of the absolute and must tend toward it. What I am saying now in this paper, for instance, I regard as representing the truth on the subject which is being examined herein, and I am at the moment trying my best to find and speak the truth. But, despite my sincerity, effort, and whatever ability I may have, there is no certainty that a still truer and a still better picture of the subject cannot be drawn. I am charged, therefore, with the responsibility of ever trying to tend toward higher truth. In some real sense I must always be afraid that what I am saying may not be adequately true. This applies not only to one case but to all human cases. Just as with cognition, so with moral action ; no matter how righteously we may try and even presume to act, there is always the scope and, what is more important, there eternally hangs the responsibility to transcend the actual. This is cognitive and moral dynamism, and a certain fearful appreciation of the inadequacy of the actual is a necessary condition of this dynamism.

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This is exactly the meaning of *taqwā*. *Taqwā*, therefore, is a positive and dynamic concept, and without it the "Trust" of man cannot be adequately discharged, according to the Qur'ān.

This dynamism of *taqwā* presupposes a transcendent norm of judgement, an absolute point of reference, which is God Himself. It is well known that the function of God in Islam is that of a judge —indeed, one might say that the central teaching of Islam about God is that He is the sole generator of norms of judgement. Man must attempt to discover these norms within his soul and endeavour to conform to them ; he cannot make or unmake these norms. Now, an individual's perception may err in locating norms which are not made for him alone but for the whole of humanity. He must therefore rely on the collective wisdom of mankind. This is the first limitation on the individual, *viz.*, that his personal discoveries are not laws of God *simpliciter*. But it is true that the individual is the proper and primary bearer of this burden of *taqwā*. It is the individual who is responsible in the final analysis. The application of *taqwā* to societies, as we shall presently see, is genuine and, in a way, necessary, according to Islam, but it is in its secondary intention. That is why, according to Islam, it is the individual who will be answerable and not societies or nations. Certain traditions attributed to the Prophet speak of the resurrection of individuals according to their religious groups or communities, but the authenticity of these traditions is highly questionable.[8] But even the traditions do not speak of a collective soul or a transcendent being of society which will come into existence and be made answerable on the Day of Judgement.

But, although the individual, in the final analysis, is the primary reality which the Qur'ān and the teaching of the Prophet recognize, there is little doubt that Islam emphasizes the co-operative and collective functioning of human beings as a society. It is not merely the case that Islam religiously requires the organization of society and the state and directly seeks to generate the law, both of which, in the West, are looked upon as purely secular institutions, but even the specifically religious duties enjoined upon a Muslim have social overtones.

There are five well-known obligatory duties devolving upon a Muslim, which are commonly called the "Pillars of Islam". The first of these is the act of belief itself, but even the act of belief does not become valid, at least so far as society is concerned, unless

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it is formally and openly avowed. The second fundamental is the five prayers. The interesting point to note about these prayers is, first, that they are collective prayers and may not be said individually except in great need, and, second, part of their content refers to the individual, and part has reference to the general Muslim Community, and both are equally essential. Besides these five prayers, devotional individual prayers are encouraged and emphasized but are not considered obligatory. The third fundamental practice of Islam, namely the obligatory fast of Ramaḍān, with its regulations, is patently and deliberately intended to produce both individual and social consequences. The fourth pillar of the Faith is the *zakat* tax (obligatory religious charity), which is nothing more or less than the establishment of a welfare state : it is a measure of socio-economic justice through and through. Lastly, the pilgrimage to Mecca has its obvious collective functions of promoting unity and solidarity among the Muslim Community.

But even more important than the fundamental practices of Islam is the fact that, if we look at the genesis of the Islamic Movement in seventh century Mecca and endeavour to discern its elan, we cannot fail to locate its collective socio-economic aspects besides the spiritual and moral aspects. If one studies the early, short, forceful, and indeed, explosive *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān, which, in the standard arrangement of the Qur'ān, appear at its end, we find only two themes insistently preached there. One is the unity of God, over against the sectional and tribal godlings of the Arabs, and the other is an essential egalitarianism, along with its obvious consequences of socio-economic and spiritual justice. Indeed, so strong is this second aspect that a pre-eminent present-day scholar of Islam, Professor H. A. R. Gibb, has said that Islam is essentially a social movement pressed into religious channels.[9] There also seems to exist, on reflection, a positive link between the moral-spiritual ideal of monotheism, on the one hand, and the idea of egalitarianism and of a just society, on the other. The Qur'ān seems to say that, if there is one God, then essentially there must be one humanity. It is on similar assumptions underlying the moral equality of man that Muslims formally resist the idea of a priesthood as an intermediary between God and the individual.

But from this very idea of equality, on the one hand, and social responsibility, on the other, also arises the inner tension

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within Islam which affected its religious history during subsequent developments—the tension between the claims of the individual and those of the collective institutions, notably the state and its laws. A brief outline of the history of these tensions will, in turn, enable us to appreciate better the nature and the magnitude of the problem which the modernist reformers of Muslim society are facing.

Due to the early rapid expansion of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula and the establishment of a vast empire, the exigencies of administration required the formulation of Islamic law. Roughly, during the first century and a half after the death of the Prophet, most of the legal materials had come into existence, and even much of the morphology of Islamic law had been nebulously formulated. The rapid political developments and the formulation of law created an external framework and the necessary instruments for this framework of regulating life according to Islam. Now, since law regulates the external behaviour of man in a social context, one necessary consequence of this brilliant but one-sided movement had been to emphasize almost exclusively the social content of Islam. A class of men grew up known as the '*Ulamā*' or the *Fuqahā*' who expressed expert opinion about what was Islamically lawful and what was not. This movement together with the opportunism that is more or less inherent in political life, produced a strong reaction among certain sensitive spirits, who began emphasizing individual character, purity of the spirit, and the "life of the heart". These men are the forerunners of the famous Ṣūfī movement in Islam. They looked askance at the social developments of Islam, particularly political and legal, as being adequately expressive of Islam. There is little doubt that their contention was genuine enough, and, as said earlier, Islam lays great emphasis, and, in fact, the final emphasis, on the quality of the individual and the inculcation of the spirit of *taqwā*.

But, unfortunately, what happened was that a dichotomy occurred in Muslim society at this juncture of its development which was absent both in the life of the Prophet and in the behaviour of people immediately around the Prophet whom he had trained. This organic unity of life was upset. It was as though one unicellular organism had blown up into several cells, each functioning as a separate organism. There is no scope here to

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portray the entire historical career of the Ṣūfī movement; suffice it to say that henceforth we find a permanent tension between the *'Ulamā'* and the Ṣūfīs, a tension which seemed to threaten the very fabric of the Islamic community. What further aggravated the situation was that the *'Ulamā'* were also functionaries of the state in various capacities, notably as *qāḍīs* and *muftīs*. In the eyes of the Ṣufī, this made the *'Ulamā'* appear even more "worldly" and as instruments of the often despotic Sulṭāns and Amīrs.

From the twelfth century onward, when Sūfism became the religion of the masses, the individualist trend became universal in Islam and manifests itself in a phenomenon of a more or less antinomianism of all shades. There is in evidence, not only a general rebellion against the social ethos of official orthodoxy but, in numerous cases, of an assertion of strictly individual morality, often degenerating into moral nihilism. This type of phenomenon has been studied ably and sympathetically and, indeed, interpreted with fervent conviction by a notable contemporary French Orientialist, Henri Corbin, whose writings constitute a vigorous attack on what he calls "Social Religion" in defence of the value of personal experience in religion.[10] The *Ulamā'*, for their part, held tenaciously to the bare external, legal structure of Islam and cared little for the value of the individual and his personal experience. But the *'Ulamā'*, against the massive onslaught of Sūfism, gradually lost ground, until, from the eighteenth century onward, new reformist movements arose, beginning with Wahhābism in the heart of Arabia. These movements tried to go back to the Qur'ān and the teaching of the Prophet and endavoured to resume the threads afresh from there.

In the meantime, another fundamental tension between the demands of change and those of permanence and stability had taken an unfortunate turn within the field of activity of the *'Ulamā'* themselves. After three centuries of hard labour and extraordinarily creative intellectual and legal activity, the *'Ulamā'* imposed a halt upon themselves, and, in the interests of stability, refused to allow the individual the right of creative thinking. This is popularly known as "closing of the door of *ijtihād*" (i.e. original thought). The late medieval centuries of Islam were characterized by a state of general stagnation. It is these reform movements again which, under the inspiration of a few outstanding and daring

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souls of the medieval era, fought to restore to the individual the right of independent thinking. This process is being helped still further by modern education. But, from our point of view, perhaps the most important characteristic of all these reform movements, one of the most conspicuous of which was launched by Shāh Walīy Allāh of Delhi (1702-1762) and led by his school after him, is the restoration of the balance which had been upset due to this one-sided development of Sūfism during the Middle Ages, with its almost exclusive emphasis on the individual to the neglect of social well-being.[11] In his writings, Shāh Walīy Allāh always emphasized the establishment of just and balanced society and tried to formulate principles of social organization while remaining true to the Islamic spiritual ideal, *viz.*, the creation of the good individual. He tells us that in the constitution of reality, every individual has his proper place and scope, which are irrevocable and indissoluble. The proper aim of a society, therefore, is to provide for the nourishment of each individual according to his capacities. But without an adequate and effective social fabric no individual life can be really nurtured. All these reform movements also try to restrain the exclusive individualism of the medieval form of Sūfism and aim at the establishment of a solid and sure social basis. The medieval manifestations of Sūfism, therefore, have suffered a great deal at the hands of the reform movements since the eighteenth century.

When we come to the period of Muslim history since the impact of the modern West, we notice certain new factors coming into play which, at first sight, give the impression that the balance has been somewhat tilted against the individual as such in the name of the state or the nation or society. This is because all Muslim peoples have had to wage a relentless fight, first of all, to gain freedom from foreign colonial powers. This effort naturally called for a collective all-out effort wherein the totality rather than the individual was stressed. In all these freedom movements, the religion of Islam has played an important role, consciously or semiconsciously, admittedly or non-admittedly. The second phase has supervened since the gaining of independence in most of the Muslim countries. This phase, which we are witnessing currently, is also characterized by certain factors which call primarily for unity and concerted efforts by the society as a whole. The truth is that in all these countries there is a tremendous desire for a rapid development

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which, in turn, requires a greater concentration of attention on the collective side than on the side of the individual. In this thrust for development, where overall planning seems extremely necessary, certain social aspects of the Islamic religious teachings are understandably invoked. This is also, however, a transient phase in the life of the Muslim peoples, and, once a certain measure of development has been reached, it is certain that the emphasis on the importance of the individual will regain its true perspective. There is no evidence that the claims of the individual as such are being impaired in these societies, which basically remain true to the fundamental faith of Islam in the individual.

QUESTION : How far is the individual really free in Islam? It is usually thought that determinism and submission are characteristic of Islam. Are they ? This is the most important question for us here, I would think.

ANSWER : You are right in saying that the most important question is about the idea of determinism in Islam and how far man can be free, under the determinism of the divine will, to follow the will of God and to submit to it or to reject it. There is little doubt that the idea of an Omnipotent God is not easy to reconcile with that of individual human freedom. This is a problem, however, for all religions, except a religion like Zoroastrianism, which patently believes in dualism. But, when people talk of the allegedly deterministic and, indeed, "despotic" character of the Islamic God, they simply do not have this basic difficulty in mind. What they are worried about is, e.g., that the Qur'ān says that God guides whomsoever He wills aright and whomsoever He wills He leads astray,[12] and such frequent expressions in the Qur'ān about the evil-doers and unbelievers as "God has sealed their hearts," or "God has put a curtain on their eyes,"[13] etc., etc. From such verses it is then concluded that, if He Himself leads people aright and astray and puts seals on their hearts and curtains on their eyes so that they cannot see and understand, and then punishes them for doing evil and rewards them for doing good, this seems the height of caprice and arbitrariness. The basic trouble is that people do not really understand what the Qur'ān is saying when it uses such expressions as those just quoted. To begin with, the Qur'ān never says that God leads people astray unconditionally. It always says, e.g., "God does not lead the evil-doers aright,"[14] or "God never guides the unjust aright,"[15] etc. Thus, to begin with, there is no un-

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conditional interference by God in human affairs, according to the Qur'ān. But it must be asked further, what is this conditional interference ? The truth seems to be that, when the Qur'ān speaks in these terms, it is, to begin with, simply describing a psychological law about good and bad conduct. What the Qur'ān is saying is that the more evil acts a person does, in normal cases, the less he becomes capable of doing good deeds, and *vice versa*, until a critical point is reached when a hardened evil-doer or a thoroughly habituated good-doer becomes so entrenched in his habits that it becomes with him a second nature, as it were. It is at this stage that the Qur'ān says of the evil-doers that God does not guide them aright and that their hearts are sealed and curtains have been put on their eyes. All the Qur'ān intends is to issue a warning that a very critical point—indeed, almost a point of no return—has been reached. This is the normal working of the psychological law about good and evil conduct.

The question arises, however, that, if the Qur'ān is describing simply such a scientific psychological process, why does it not use scientific language, and why does it express itself in these terms ? The answer is that actually there is no point either on the side of good or on the side of evil which is an *absolute* point of no return, that there is really no point in evil from which one cannot return, or at least try to return, and, similarly, there is no point on the side of good from which no fall is ever to be feared. Such cases, in fact, have been registered in thousands of instances in history—cases of sudden conversion in which hardened evil-doers who were given up by all moralists as past redemption have suddenly experienced a complete reversal in their conscience. The Qur'ān wants to keep this door open, and, in fact, it uses the language that it uses as being calculated to influence precisely such evil cases. This is why it uses threatening terms rather than purely scientific descriptive language. This shows that the working of the moral law is not quite like that of physical law and that God's grace is present in the former in a distinct way.

There is, therefore, no arbitrary interference on the part of God with the exercise of freedom by man. Islam is submission to God's will. But God's will, which operates both at the physical and at the moral level, has to be discovered by man and then be conformed to. This is Islam. Of course, it is possible for a man wilfully to disobey the will of God, but in this very freedom con-

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sists the real greatness of man.

QUESTION : How can Sūfism be construed as being individualistic when the very ideal of Sūfism is the losing of the individual in God or the Absolute ?

ANSWER : The ideal of Sūfism is not the annihilation of the individual self in God. Sūfism has developed, since the third century of *Hijrah* (i.e. 9th century A.C.), certain pairs of antinomical but complementary concepts which insist that the mystic experience involved two movements or a double movement of the human ego, the first toward the inner, the annihilation of the self, and the other outward, or the regaining of a richer selfhood. This doctrine has been universally accepted by the Ṣūfīs. The various pairs of categories used to designate this double movement are "intoxication and sobriety", "inner and outer", "annihilation and survival", "unity and plurality", etc. This should put at rest the minds of all those who think that the mystic experience of Sūfism consists in a simple annihilation of the individual self. However, what I meant in my paper by Sūfism's being individualistic was that the Ṣūfī sought his salvation alone and in isolation from society, and this trend, when it became general, endangered the fabric of Islam as a social texture and made Muslim society more individualistic, or, rather, tended to make Muslims into isolated individuals.

NOTES

1. For example, H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 25.
2. al-Qur'ān, VI : 95.
3. *Ibid.*, XIX : 80.
4. *Ibid.*, VI : 165.
5. *Ibid.*, II : 30.
6. *Ibid.*, II : 31.
7. *Ibid.*, XXXIII : 72.
8. Al-Bukhārī : *Ṣaḥiḥ*, chap. *Tafsīr Sūrat Banī Isrā'īl* ; al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, chap. *Mā jā'a fī ṣifat al-ḥawḍ*. There are certain verses of the Qur'ān which speak of men being grouped (according to their prophets or leaders) on the Day of Resurrection (II : 134 & 141 ; XLV : 28 ; XVII : 71 ; LXXVIII : 17), but the emphasis is always on the individual's responsibility. [For later development of this idea in Islamic Eschatology see pp. 338-39 of this Journal.—*Editor.*]
9. Gibb, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
10. For this problem, Henri Corbin's *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Paris : Ernest Flammarion, 1958) is particularly important.

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11. There is no special work comprehensively devoted to an account of these reform movements. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1958), however, contains some useful material. See also my work, *Islam*, chap. XII, published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966.
12. al-Qur'ān, II : 26 ; XIV : 4.
13. *Ibid.*, II : 7.
14. *Ibid.*, V : 108,
15. *Ibid.*, II : 258.

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